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ABSTRACT

Six practical components of listening comprehension and sources of listening materials are considered. Listening comprehension depends on: (1) the sonic realization or actual physical hearing of language, (2) the segmental/suprasegmental form (phoneme distinction), (3) the musical pitch and rhythm, (4) lexical phrasing, (5) the purpose of the message intended by the speaker, and (6) the actualization of the message in the listener. Sources of good listening material, listed in order of importance, are: the teacher; other speakers of the target language; recordings of radio broadcasts, music, speeches; films and television programs; and commercially-produced language laboratory tapes. The importance of frequently exposing students to the language as it is actually used by fluent speakers is emphasized. The technique of adapting materials from the radio is illustrated by a weather report in German. Fifteen weather reports were recorded, since they are usually in a fixed format, with certain kinds of information in certain locations. Certain words and phrases were deleted from one report to the next, and three of the reports were not transcribed for the students, who were required to provide the basic information about the weather. It is suggested that the same technique can be used for other types of short abridged language material, especially music. Some limitations of commercially-produced tapes are noted. (SW)

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Are You Listening?
The Practical Components of Listening Comprehension.

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Introduction

Language is three-dimensional. It consists of (1) a linear dimension, (2) a structural dimension, and (3) an experiential dimension. The linear dimension consists of the sounds and utterances at they are produced in real time or as the lines of printed text on a page. The structural dimension involves the systems and subsystems which determine which sounds and utterances and lines of print are produced, when, and in which order. The experiential dimension represents all the uses (and abuses) to which language is put, as well as all the "experiences" (impressions, motivations, feelings, reactions, etc.) which a person retains from exposure to language.

Dividing language into three parts is nothing new. Structural linguists have phonology, morphosyntax, and semantics. Psychologists might divide language up into "lexical" elements (including pronunciation and spelling conventions), "semantic/syntactic" elements (i.e., grammar!), and "content/conceptual" elements.[1] Parallel to the work of descriptive linguistics is the research of information processing theory, which sees language as an exchange of information at the "statistical" level (physical representation of a signal, i.e. phonemes or graphemes), "semantic" level (encoding/decoding signals correctly), and "pragmatic" level (what happens to the recipient of the signal!)[2].

The point here is that language has not only forms, but also functions. It has depth and not just surface. It does things and does not exist merely for its own sake. A concentration on one or more specific aspects of any one dimension may be necessary from a pedagogical point view, but if it isn't (re)integrated into a larger, multidimensional reality, learning does not take place.

How does this apply to listening? Let us begin by clarifying what is meant by listening. First of all, it is not a skill, but a set of skills all marked by the fact that they involve the aural perception of oral signals. Secondly, listening is not "passive." A person can hear something but not be listening. His or her short-term memory may completely discard certain incoming sounds but concentrate on others. This involves a highly active interaction between perception and concentration. Thirdly, while listening may not be necessary in order to, for example, translate written texts (especially those of so-called "dead" languages), it is absolutely necessary for any other work with language, especially for speaking, and even for writing. All of this leads quite spontaneously to the fact that listening is tightly interwoven with other language skills.

Krashen[3] indicates that for successful language acquisition to take

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place there must be meaningful "intake." Specifically he says, "the major function of the second language classroom is to provide intake for acquisition." The major channel for "meaningful intake" in the classroom is the auditory channel. In order to understand this better, it is necessary to examine the components of listening and listening comprehension.

Listening and Listening Comprehension

Listening consists of the following components:
(1) the sonic realization
(2) the segmental/suprasegmental form
(3) the musical pitch and rhythm
(4) the lexical phrasing
(5) the purpose of the message intended by the speaker, and
(6) the actualization of the message in the listener.

The sonic aspect of listening involves the actual physical "hearing" of language. Disregarding physical impairment, just about anybody can recognize human speech sounds as "language," and can distinguish such sounds from other, non-language sounds, such as yawning, gargling, belching, and clearing the throat. Some people can even identify a particular language by hearing a sample of it, even if they know little or nothing else about it.

This leads to the segmental/suprasegmental form. One of the major requirements for meaningful second language listening is the ability to distinguish the phonemes of the language. Most dialogues in textbooks have at least this in mind, namely, to introduce and practice the individual sounds and the sound patterns of the language.

Musical pitch and rhythm are harder to pin down. They involve not only determining that there is a difference between fährt and fällt or between schon and schön or that a given utterance is a question as opposed to a command, as in Fahren Sie nach Hause? vs. Fahren Sie nach Hause! Rather they refer to the fact that speakers exchange important information about themselves by the way they speak, not just by what they speak. Subtleties of irony, disgust, pleasure; age, sex, social status, etc. are all transmitted by speakers and are readily picked up by language users, whether intentionally or unintentionally. These are also transmitted to student learners of language as well.

Lexical phrasing means that certain words and phrases are encoded in a particular order in order to get a message across. It is not enough to say that according to the grammar of the language words and phrases have to be arranged in a certain way. Within limits word order can be flexible. The flexibility is translated into segmental/suprasegmental form and into the musical pitch and rhythm. For example, in answering the question Fahren Sie mit dem Zug? it is posible to respond Nein, ich fahre mit dem Zug nicht or Nein, ich fahre nicht mit dem Zug. Both replies are grammatically legitimate, but they cannot be spoken, or listened to, in exactly the same way. The particular phrasing of the latter utterance may, in fact, be one of the reasons why its particular format is the more common of the two in German. Indeed,

the grammar of most languages makes provision for alternate word order and phrasing, such as the fronting of elements other than the subject in German for emphasis (Heute spielen wir Tennis vs. Wir spielen heute Tennis.) or contraction of prepositional phrases to contrast general with specific location (Wir sitzen im Zimmer vs. Wir sitzen in dem Zimmer).

Speakers speak because they have something to say, and listeners listen because they want or need to react to what speakers speak. Normally we ask a question in order to get an answer. Normally we give a command because we want to get a particular action performed. Normally we praise because we want the other person to feel good, at least temporarally, and curse because we want the other person to feel less than good, even to the point of cursing back! All of this information is contained in speech. If the information and intention are not retrieved by the listener, then there is no point in speaking in the first place. And no reason to listen either!

Sources of Material

Which are sources of good listening material? They will be listed here in their order of importance. This is, unfortunately, not necessarily their order of availability. They are:

(1) the teacher,
(2) other speakers of the target language,
(3) recordings of radio broadcasts, music, speeches, etc.
(4) films and television programs, and
(5) commercially-produced language laboratory tapes.

The teacher is obviously the first and primary source of material for listening comprehension. He or she is often the best source, since he or she can modify what students hear to what they can comprehend. The teacher should, therefore, use the target language as much as possible in the classroom. Specifically he or she sould use it for as much as possible for generating dynamically "listenable" utterances," used for reacting to student responses gut! prima! das verstehe ich nicht! nein! vielleicht! na und?, or directing classroom activities machen Sie das Buch auf! Ruhe! Passen Sie auf! Wie bitte? or "recycling" student contributions John sagt, er ist reich. Bist du reich, Bill? or making everyday offhand comments expressing personal feelings like Mensch, ist es aber heiß hier!

Other speakers need not be natives, although they should be fluent. They also need not be physically present in the classroom all the time, if ever. They should, however, be available to students in some way. If the school has a German Club, they should be invited to participate in activities such as "German Table." It is not necessary for students to speak with them, but it is invaluable for listening comprehension skills to have students listen to speakers speaking the language among themselves or with teachers. Even palavering next to the coffee pot is an excellent way for students to "perceive" an otherwise academic subject as a living, breathing, speaking being. Although I am phrasing this somewhat trivially, it is essential for students to be exposed as much as possible to the language as it is

actually used by fluent speakers. As long as students are not forced to make any complex contribution to the exchange, they will normally be unperturbed when exposed to the natural speech of native speakers, whether in person or through the broadcast media'. This brings us to the next valuable source of useful listening comprehension material.

Records with target language music and speeches can usually be purchased in stores either here or abroad. Material from the radio, however, is not always available to the average teacher, although agencies such as "Inter Nationes" do have tapes available from a variety of sources, including radio. If the material is available, it should be used. This may require some adaptation, if the work has not been done already by the distributing agency. However,the teacher can do many simple things with unabridged radio tape material, however.

I have done this to a certain extent with news broadcasts. From a series of news broadcasts recorded over a period of three days in Germany, I dubbed together all the weather reports. Because weather reports are usually in a fixed predictable format, with certain kinds of information in certain locations within the linear flow of language, it is relatively easy to train students to listen to them meaningfully, With 15 such weather reports together I provided students with transcripts of the tape. However, as the taped weather reports moved from one segment to the next, part of the transcript "disappeared."

Here is a sample Wetterbericht, representative of the hundreds broadcast every year over the Bayrischer Rundfunk:

> Der Wetterbericht, ausgegebenen um 16 Uhr. Die Vorhersage bis morgen abend. Südbayern und Donaugebiet mit bayrischem Wald: Teils aufgeheitert, teils stärker bewölkt und vor allem nachmittags örtlich Schauer oder Gewitter. Tiefstwerte in der kommenden Nacht 8 bis 13 Grad. Tageshöchsttemperaturen morgen 18 bis 22 Grad. In den Alpen in 2000 Meter um 5 Grad. Gipfel vielfach in Wolken. Schwacher, zeitweise mässiger Wind aus Nordwest bis Nordost. Nordbayern mit seinen Mittelgebirgen: Zunächst veränderliche, im Osten überwiegend starke Bewölkung. Morgen teils heiter, teils wolkig, vereinzelt Schauer oder Gewitter. Nächtliche Abkühlung auf 12 bis 8 Grad. Tageserwärmung auf 20 bis 24 Grad. In den Mittelgebirgen auf etwas über 15 Grad. Schwacher bis mässiger nördlicher Wind. Die weiteren Aussichten für Bayern bis Freitag abend. Leicht unbeständig, jedoch noch geringfügig wärmer. Sie hörten Nachrichten. Es ist 17 Uhr und 8 Minuten.

With the weather reports in the particular order that I wanted, I proceeded to delete certain words and phrases successively from one report to the next. Report A was complete. Report B and following had no numbers written out. Report C and following had no days of the week in them. Report D and following had none of the more common expressions for weather conditions in them: kalt, warm, heiß, etc. Report E and following had none of the less common expressions for weather conditions in them: heiter, wolkig, bedeckt, etc. Report J

had a more extended report including temperatures and general conditions for areas outside of Bavaria. The last three reports were complete on the tape but were not transcribed for the students. The students were asked to provide the basic information about time of day, temperatures and temperature ranges, general weather conditions, and the forecast for the coming 24 hours.

The same technique can be used for just about any other type of short abridged language material, especially music. I have used it successfully with songs, even with such divergent pieces as Georg Danzer's "Sex Appeal", Nina Hagen's "Unbeschreiblich weiblich," Peter Schickele's, that is, P.D.Q. Bach's "Blaues Gras Cantata" as well as more tradidional songs such as "Heidenröslein" and "Jäger aus Kurpfalz." What is important here is to determine what it is you wish students to listen to, delete it from the written transcript (if one is used at all!), and have students fill it in. The music, the voice of the singer, the rhythm and phrasing of the song, etc. will normally help make the text come alive in a way that simply reading it, silently or aloud, will not accomplish.

Films cannot normally be shown in class, even if they are available otherwise. When they are available students should be encouraged to view them. For listening comprehensin purposes any film is good, even if it is not a box-office hit! Most students who go to foreign-language films say that although they cannot completely follow the film without reading the subtitles, they can pick out sounds and sound patterns, familiar words and phrases, and the overall "gist" of speaker intention, feeling, action. Sometimes there is a pedagogical dividend from seeing and listening to a foreign-language film. After viewing Schloendorff's Der junge Törleß one student remarked that she remembered that one character said Das ist unmöglich several times during the film. The phrase was one that I use in class on an all too regular basis!

Language laboratory tapes are readily available and serve useful functions when it comes time for students to practice very specific aspects of the language. However, they are at best a supplement to learning and acquisition, not a central feature of it. The reasons for this are clear. Most commercially produced lab tapes are made in sound studios. As a result they have no background noises, no echo, no "depth." In addition, most commercial studio speakers speak in a very slow, precise cadence, with few interruptions, contractions, or hesitations. For oral practice of new material at the beginning stages this may be all to the good, since students are expected to repeat verbatim what is said or make minimal changes in the particular message. Because of varying degrees of technical playback quality in most language laboratories it is also necessary not to allow, let alone insert, extraneous noises.

However, it is safe to say that most students find the material on language lab tapes dull. Some even find them ridiculous. Take, for example, the following scenario. Walter, who, to judge by his voice, is a man in his fifties, is interested in living together with Ingrid, a woman one would judge to be about 30. She sounds suspiciously like

her mother, Frau Fischer, a woman who would have to be in the 45 to 50 year range at least. One suspects that perhaps Frau Fischer is secretly interested in Walter herself, a man no doubt the age of her husband, about whom we learn very little and from whom we hear not a sound! There are two other marginal figures in the scenario, Günther, who is Walter's friend, and Petra, who is Ingrid's friend. Günther could be about 25. Petra sounds at least 30, like Ingrid. Notice that all of these suspicions and impressions are gained from listening to a tape, not from reading the textbook which it accompanies. For, lo and behold, when you do read the textbook you discover that Petra and Ingrid and Günther and Walter are all German university students. Frau Fischer is, well, Frau Fischer. It is rare to find a university student in a German-speaking country who is over 30 and almost inconceivable to find one who is over 50. But that is how all of them sound. To put it bluntly, for most of our students, German students represented on commercially available tapes sound like "old folks" or the teacher, whoever is younger!

I am not criticizing commercially produced tape material as a means of improving listening comprehension skill. I am simply pointing out that most are very limited in their ability to help students learn "three-dimensionally."

Conclusion

There has been quite a bit of research done on the nature of listening comprehension, both generally[5] and with reference to second languae learning[4]. Although it is not possible to review it here, it should be clear that, like reading, listening cannot be learned with reference to other language skills or without regard for the experiences which learners gather from exposure to it. Meaningful listening experiences can be produced spontaneously and with little beforehand preparation by the teacher. Yet, if guided properly, these experiences will yield considerable dividends in terms of long-term acquisition, and enjoyment, of language.

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APPENDIX

The following is a handout used during formal presentation of the ideas contained in this paper. It is designed to help participants (and the reader) listen critically to any spoken text, regardless of the listener's overall proficiency in the target language.

I. EXPERIMENT

WHO?	WHAT?	HOW?	WHY?
male/female?	information?	formal/informal/	to inform?
old/young?	opinion?	neutral/nonneutral?	to direct?
familiar/ unfamiliar?	direction?	indifferent/ animated?	to move?
friend/stranger?	song?	soft/loud?	to entertain?
native/nonnative?	speech?		
how many?	dialogue/monologue?		

II. STRUCTURE

	less restricted	more restricted
Phoneme Morpheme Lexeme (Syn)Tagmeme Phrase Clause Sentence Text	TIME	(AB)USE
The World!	more restricted	less restricted

III. SOURCES (important subject!)

TEACHER	TAPES/RECORDS	Other
question-answer	exercises	other teachers
order-response	songs	(native) speakers
action-reaction	speeches	films/videotapes
"supply-demand"	readings	radio/television
		camps
		agencies
		being there!

IV. EXAMPLES

(1) News broadcasts
(2) Weather reports
(3) Advertizing
(4) Songs
(5) Tape and slide (sound and light)